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Impact of Online Content on Attitudes and Buying Intentions

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ABSTRACT

User generated content (UGC) is an important source of information to consumers, yet prior research has not fully explored how certain aspects of the content, specifically the tone, perception of quality and source credibility influence attitudes and intentions to buy. This study investigates how the tone of UGC influences perceived content quality, source credibility, attitudes and consumer intentions to buy. Using the Elaboration Likelihood Model, the study also seeks to understand how consumer expertise moderates the impact of perceived content quality and perceived source credibility on attitudes and intentions to buy. Using a survey and vignette with 209 participants, the results of the study indicate that the tone of the content influences attitudes and intentions to buy; more importantly, consumer expertise moderates the impact of perceived source credibility and perceived content quality on attitudes. The results inform practice on what dimensions of UGC are salient to changes in attitudes.

Keywords

User generated content; buying intentions, online communities, product reviews.

INTRODUCTION

Some 98 percent of surveyed shoppers indicated that they read reviews on retailers' websites prior to making a product purchase (E-Tailing Group, 2008). According to Deloitte's Consumer Product Group survey, 62 percent of consumers read consumer-generated product reviews and purchase decisions of 80 percent of these readers are influenced by consumer product reviews (Deloitte's Consumer Products Group, 2007). The growth of C2C product reviews has stimulated research on user generated content (UGC) and consumer behavior; however these studies have not fully explored how the tone, perception of content quality and source credibility influence attitudes and purchase intentions; and the moderating role of consumer expertise.

Considering the importance of UGC to users and organizations, studies to understand what aspects and features of UGC are salient to consumers can be insightful. This study seeks to achieve two goals. First, investigate how the tone of UGC influences perception of content quality, source credibility, attitudes and intentions to buy. Second, examine how the impact of perceived source credibility and perceived content quality on attitudes and intentions to purchase are moderated by consumer expertise. To accomplish these goals, this study draws on the theoretical perspective of elaboration likelihood model (ELM).

BACKGROUND

Electronic communities enable their members to interact and exchange information on shared interests, through technology mediated mediums, such as message boards, chat rooms, social networking sites, and virtual worlds (Wasko and Faraj, 2000). Prior research has explored many dimensions of the growth, generation, and impact of UGC, especially the motivation to contribute, impact on sales and firm performance, and consumer reaction (Wasko and Faraj 2000, 2005; Daugherty, Eastin and Bright, 2008; Forman, Ghose and Wiesenfeld, 2008). Many organizations rely on reviews and feedback to gauge consumer perception of product and service quality. For example, customer reviews on vacation destinations, hotels and services influence the perceptions of other customers and are important for the performance of many firms in the tourism industry (Ye, Law, Gu and Chen, 2011; Litvin, Goldsmith and Pan, 2008).

Self-expression, self-actualization, extrinsic motivation, intrinsic motivation, fun and ideology are some of the motivations cited for contributing to online content and knowledge (Shao, 2009 Nov, 2007; Daugherty et al., 2008). Examining these motivations are important to understanding UGC; however, it is equally important to understand what aspects of the content influences attitudes and intentions.

Consumer generated product reviews influence consumer purchasing decisions and sales. For example, online

product reviews are important indicators of sales in the motion picture industry. Purchase intentions, brand loyalty, attitudes towards products and behavior intentions in the market place are all partly influenced by consumer generated content (Lee, Park and Han, 2008; Dwyer, 2007; Brown, Broderick and Lee, 2007; Cheong and Morrison, 2008; Shao, 2009). Online book sales have been linked to consumer product reviews and certain characteristics of reviews have also been shown to influence sales (Chevalier and Mayzlin, 2003; Forman et al., 2008; Dellarocas, Zhang, and Awad, 2007). There is ample evidence in prior research that UGC influences consumer behavior and sales of products such as books, CDs and movies (Dellarocas et al., 2004; Dhar and Chang, 2007). The inclusion of identity descriptive information, such as the identity of the reviewer, geographical location, nickname, birthday and real name influences how the information is perceived and processed (Forman et al., 2008). Thus, contextual cues, such as source disclosure, are important in determining how content is perceived and processed. Likewise, certain aspects of the content and how the content is presented can influence consumer behavior. Prior studies have independently investigated different aspects of the UGC but have not integrated them into a single study to understand how various aspects of content influence attitudes and intentions to buy. Although there is evidence that product reviews influence consumer purchase decisions; prior research has not fully addressed what aspects of the content are salient to consumers and users. The current study focuses on tone, perceived content quality, and perceived source credibility in order to understand how these aspects of UGC influence consumer attitudes and buying intentions. In addition to the characteristics of the content, this study posits that individual characteristics, specifically consumer expertise, moderates how content characteristics influence attitudes and purchase intentions. To achieve these goals, the study will use the theoretical lens of ELM to understand how perceived source credibility and perceived content quality influence attitudes and attention and how that relationship is moderated by individual expertise.

HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

How individuals process information has been studied using many theoretical approaches. One such approach is the information processing theory. The information processing theory focuses on how the cognitive mechanisms of sensory memory, short term memory and long term memory process information (Shiffrin, and Schneider, 1977). The cognitive mechanism approach to information processing does not adequately account for how the context and medium of presentation influence the persuasive process.

Many factors, including the content, context, source and prior knowledge influence how individuals process and adopt information. These factors also determine the amount of cognitive effort exerted in processing the information and the consequent changes in attitudes and intentions (Wright, 1973). One of the models often used to explain the impact of persuasive communication is ELM. ELM provides a framework for explaining the mechanisms of how information influences attitudes and behavior. Attitudinal changes due to information content, according to the ELM framework, can be attributed to the likelihood that the recipient will elaborate on the information (Petty and Cacioppo, 1984, 1986; Petty, Cacioppo and Schumann, 1983). ELM advances a continuum of elaboration process, anchored at one end by the central route of persuasion, where likelihood of elaboration is high, and at the opposite end by peripheral route of persuasion, where likelihood of elaboration is low.

Elaboration is the extent to which people evaluate the issue-relevancy of the content. In the central route, the persuasive process and attitudinal changes are the results of careful consideration, evaluation and integration of relevant information. The central route of persuasion requires ability and motivation to cognitively evaluate content. Persuasion through the central route is more enduring and a good predictor of behaviors (Petty and Cacioppo, 1984, 86; Bitner and Obermiller, 1985). Unlike the central route, likelihood of elaboration is low in the peripheral route of persuasion and recipients rely on contextual cues. The peripheral route requires relatively less cognitive effort because individuals rely on contextual cues to assess the veracity of content and attitudinal changes are less enduring. The ELM has been used to explain how consumers react to websites, including e-commerce sites, and how the persuasive argument presented by the website are internalized and processed (Yang et al. 2006) In e-commerce environments, both contextual cues (periphery route) and perceived quality of content (central route) influence consumer attitudes (Dhar and Chang, 2007; Pan and Zhang, 2011).

The ELM framework has also been used to explain the adoption of information and technology. Argument quality and source credibility influence attitudes and perceptions in the adoption of information and management information systems. Prior studies have identified several moderating factors, including user expertise, job relevance and concern for privacy in the application of ELM to explain the adoption of information and management information systems (Sussman and Siegal, 2003; Bhattachajee and Sanford, 2006; Angst and Agarwal, 2009). ELM is appropriate for the current study, because of the focus on how different aspects of content and information influence intentions and attitudes.

In verbal communication, the tone of a message is conveyed by intonation, inflexion and pitch. Therefore emotions are easily conveyed by the tone of a message in verbal communication. In OLCs, because communication is mediated by computer technology, the tone of the content is conveyed in different ways. For instances, expletives, emoticon (Krohn, 2004), and the disposition of the message may convey the tone of a message. In this study the focus is on the disposition of

the content, in particular, the distribution of favorability or unfavorability content. Tone captures the mood and the disposition projected by the content. Attitudinal changes, purchase intentions, perceived content quality and perceived source credibility are susceptible to the tone and mood projected by the content.

Consumer expectations play an important role in products evaluations (Anderson, 1973; Oliver and Swan, 1989). Similarly, consumers' expectations influence their attitudes when perusing UGC. When the tone of the message fails to meet these expectations, individuals are motivated to determine why. The likelihood of elaboration increases due to the motivation to ascertain why the tone of a message is not consistent. Thus, when the message is perceived to be inconsistent, users are more likely to elaborate on the content of the message than when the tone of the content is consistent.

Attitudes and intentions to purchase are also influenced by the tone conveyed by the content. When the tone of UGC is inconsistent with consumers' expectations, they will evaluate their attitudes and purchase intentions. When consumers have some expectation of a product, but the disposition and tone of product reviews are contrary to these expectations, consumer attitudes and purchase intentions will change to reflect the tone of the content. On the other hand, if the tone of the content is consistent with consumer expectation, then attitudes and purchase intention is reaffirmed by the tone of the content. In line with these arguments, the tone of UGC, reflected in the distribution of favorable and unfavorable content on a product or services, will influence how certain aspects of the content is perceived and also influence consumers' attitudes and their buying intentions. Hence the following hypothesis:

H1: The tone and mood of UGC influence consumer perceptions of content quality and source credibility as well as attitudes and intentions to buy.

OLCs are rich sources of information for members and consumers. Although the content may be unstructured, they provide an important source of information to members of the community and the public. Attitudes and intentions are likely to be influenced when content arguments are perceived to be logical. Normally, consumers or members of the community search the content for information relevant to an interest or a concern. When users find relevant information within the content, they evaluate the logic of the argument to ascertain if the information is relevant to their interests. When the likelihood of elaboration is high, users are more likely to adjust their attitudes and buying intentions to reflect the content of the message. Elaboration requires cognitive effort, time, and ability and is more likely to have an impact on attitudes and intentions. Thus, we argue that, as consumers evaluate UGC, their attitudes and buying intentions are more likely to change if they perceived the content to be relevant and logical. Hence, the hypothesis:

H2A: Perceived content quality of UGC is positively related to attitudes towards product.

Contextual cues, including source credibility, are important in the persuasive processes. Contextual cues such as the presentation of the information and the disposition of the user may impact how content is perceived and processed. The peripheral route of persuasion, according to the ELM, relies on other factors besides the content of the information (Petty and Cacioppo, 1986). As users and consumers evaluate UGC, if they lack the ability or motivation to elaborate on the content, they will rely on contextual cues. Due to the sheer amount of information generated in OLCs, it is easier for members and consumers to rely on contextual cues, such as perceived source credibility, to evaluate content. If the source of the content is perceived to be credible, then the recipients may also infer that the content is valid. How users and consumers perceive source credibility will influence how they make adjustments to their attitudes and intentions. These contextual cues may signal trust and reliability. When perceptions of source credibility are high, consumers and users are more likely to accept the message content and adjust their attitudes and intentions. Perception of source credibility is a belief in the integrity and veracity of the source. Thus, this study hypothesizes:

H2B: Perceived source credibility of UGC is positively related to attitude towards product.

Individual characteristics, such expertise and prior knowledge, will influence the likelihood of elaboration. Consumer expertise is the result of prior knowledge and know-how in a particular area or domain. Individuals with expertise have the ability to evaluate the issue-relevancy of a message and may rely less on contextual cues. When consumers have prior knowledge and expertise on a product or service, they are more likely to elaborate on product reviews. High expertise increase ability, thus high expertise individuals rely more on content and argument quality to discern the veracity than low expertise individuals. Changes in attitudes will be much higher for individuals with high expertise than those with low expertise. Consequently, consumers with high expertise will experience more significant changes in their attitudes as their perceived content quality increases. Knowledgeable consumers have the expertise to elaborate on message content and attitude formation is more likely to rely on the issue relevancy of an argument and less on contextual factors.

Individuals with low expertise may find it difficult and challenging to focus on content quality, therefore, they rely on contextual cues, such as perceived source credibility, to make attitudinal changes. Attitudinal changes due to perceived source credibility will be much higher for individuals with low expertise than individuals with high expertise. Perceived source credibility will have a much larger impact on attitudes of individuals with low expertise than those with high expertise, hence the following hypotheses

H3A: The positive relation between perceived content quality and attitudes is moderated by consumer expertise, such that changes in attitudes are higher for individuals with high expertise than those with low expertise

H3B: The positive relation between perceived source credibility and attitudes is moderated by consumer expertise, such that changes in attitudes are higher for individuals with low expertise than those with high expertise

Prior literature on intentions and attitudes indicate that there is a positive relationship between attitudes and intentions. Attitudes towards an object influence intentions and eventually behaviors (Ajzen and Fishbein, 1975). When individuals evaluate UGC on a product or service, they may form positive or negative attitudes based on their conclusions. When individuals have positive attitudes towards a product, they are favorably inclined to the product. A favorable disposition towards a product will result in a positive attitude towards the product and intentions to purchase the product. Thus a positive attitude is more likely to induce a consumer to purchase a product. Hence the hypothesis:

H4: Consumer attitudes towards a product are positively related to intentions to purchase the product.

STUDY DESIGN

To test the hypotheses advanced in the study, a sample was drawn from Amazon Mechanical Turk. Participants in the study were rewarded for participation. Participants who sign up for the study were presented with a vignette simulating a consumer intending to buy a digital camera. There are four variations of the website; and participants are randomly assigned to one of the four. The retailer generated information is the same for all the four websites, however, the proportion of favorable and unfavorable product reviews generated by customers are different for each of the websites. In the first website, all the reviews generated by other customers are favorable. In the second website, most of the reviews are favorable. In the third website, all the reviews are unfavorable and in the fourth website most of the reviews are unfavorable. Participants are asked to review the information on the websites with the intention of making a purchase. As a manipulation check, the survey asks participants if the reviews were favorable or unfavorable. Questionnaire from participants who failed the manipulation check were excluded from the study. The study used a seven point Likert scale questionnaire ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). The questionnaire measured perceived content quality using measures adapted from Bailey and Pearson (1983) and McKinney, Yoon, and Zahedi, (2002). Perceived credibility of the source is measured by scales adopted from Wu and Shaffer (1987) and McKinney et al. (2002). Expertise is measured with scales developed by Stamm and Dube (1994). The dependent variables, attitudinal changes and purchase intentions are measured by scales adopted from established measures (Bhattacharjee and Sandford, 2006; Taylor and Todd, 1995; Herr et al., 1991). A scale adapted from Venkatesh, Morris, Davis, and Davis (2003) measures consumer intention to purchase.

RESULTS

The study collected questionnaires from 260 participants; however due to failure to meet the manipulation check 51 questionnaires were excluded from the study. A total of 209 questionnaires were deemed appropriate for data analysis. Confirmatory factor analysis was conducted to assess the internal consistency and reliability of the measures. Most of the observed indicators loaded on the appropriate factor. Four of the observed indicators were excluded from the measures because of poor loadings and cross loadings. Factor analysis was done using maximum likelihood extraction and promax rotation and the results are displayed in Table 1. All loading for observed indicators are above 0.60, and the Cronbach's Alpha for all the latent factors are above 0.80, demonstrating reliability and discriminate validity of the latent constructs. Hypothesis H1 was tested using ANOVA and H2A to H4 were tested using OLS regression.

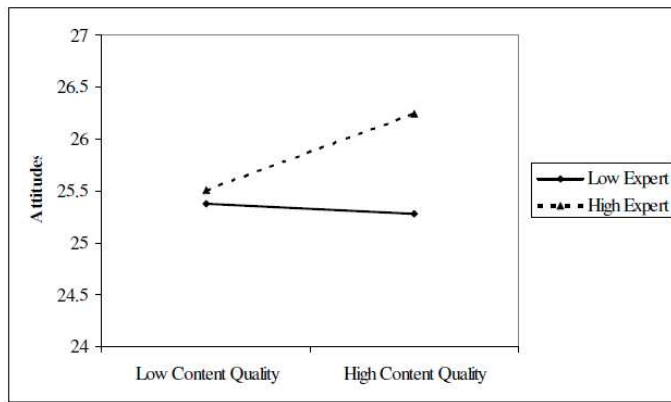
	1	2	3	4	5
Intention 1	0.709				
Intention2	0.711				
Intention 3	0.744				
Attitude 1		0.922			
Attitude2		0.888			
Attitude3		0.775			
Attitude4		0.973			
Attitude5		0.878			
Expert1			0.784		
Expert2			0.951		
Expert3			0.923		
Quality3				0.763	
Quality4				0.574	
Quality5				0.758	
Quality6				0.883	
Source1					0.734
Source2					0.844
Source3					0.818
Source4					0.725
Cronbach's Alpha	0.96	0.95	0.92	0.85	0.87
Extraction Method: Maximum Likelihood. Rotation Method: Promax (Exclude loading below 0.35)					

To test H1, the sample was divided into four groups based on the distribution of favorable and unfavorable reviews. Using ANOVA, the analysis tested if there any difference in variance among the four groups with respect to perceived content quality, perceived source credibility, intentions and attitudes. There are differences in variance among the groups with respect to only intentions and attitudes. For attitudes the difference in variance is significant (N= 209, df =3, F = 11.57 p-value < 0.001). The difference in variance for intentions is also significant (N= 209, df =3, F = 11.72, p-value < 0.001) Post hoc analysis using Tukey's pairwise comparison results indicated that there is variation in intentions to buy and attitudes between participants exposed to favorable and unfavorable content. These result provides partial support for H1, although the tone of the content does not influence perception of quality and credibility as suggested, the tone of the content influence variation in attitudes and purchase intentions.

	Main and Interaction Effects (DV = Attitude)		(DV =Intent)
	Model 1 β	Model 2 β	Model 3 β
Content Quality	0.18**	0.16**	
Source Credibility	0.18**	0.18**	
Expert	0.25***	0.28***	
Expert X Content Quality		0.21***	
Expert X Source Credibility		-0.13*	
Attitude			0.78***
R-Square	0.24	0.26	0.60
Δ R-Square		0.02	
F ² (Δ R-Square)		0.03 #	
*** p < 0.01, ** p < 0.05, *p<0.10 #F ² effect sizes of 0.02, 0.15, and 0.35 are termed <i>small</i> , <i>medium</i> , and <i>large</i> , respectively			

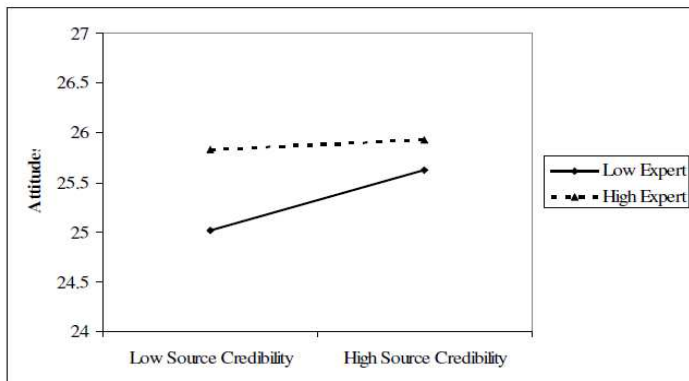
The results of the regression analysis are presented in Table 2. The standardized coefficient for perceived content quality is 0.18 (p-value < 0.05) and the results for perceived source credibility is 0.18 (p-value < 0.05) and the R-square for the model is 0.24. Model 1 of the regression analysis supports H2A and H2B. The standardized coefficients of the main effects are significant. Hypotheses H3A and H3B posit the moderating effects of expertise. Hypothesis H3A argues that expertise increases the motivation and ability to elaborate on content and changes in attitudes are more likely to be higher for consumers with high expertise than those with low expertise. The beta coefficient for the product term, expertise and perceived content quality, is significant at 0.21 (p-value < 0.05). The slopes of the interaction effects are graphically depicted in Figure 1. Changes in attitudes are much higher for users with high expertise than users with low expertise as predicted. Perceived content quality is more salient to consumers with high level of expertise and is also more likely to change their

Figure 1: Interaction Effects (Content)



attitudes due to the perceived quality of the content than those with low expertise. Implicitly high expertise consumers are more likely to rely on perceived content quality to make decision on attitudes. Hypothesis H3B posits that expertise will moderate the positive relations between perceived source credibility and attitudes, such that attitude changes for consumers with high expertise will be lower. The beta coefficient for the interaction effects is partially significant at -0.13 (p-value < 0.10).

Figure 2: Interaction Effects (Source)



The interaction effect is graphically depicted in Figure 2, as perceived source credibility increases, changes in attitudes for consumer with low expertise increase, however, changes in attitudes is much lower for consumers with high expertise. Thus, perceived source credibility is much more important for consumers with low expertise and attitudinal changes due to perceived source credibility are relatively higher for consumers with low expertise than those with high expertise.

Thus hypothesis H3B is partially supported; consumers with low expertise are more likely to form attitudinal changes due to source credibility. The regression results also show that R-square increased from 24 percent to 26 percent, an increase of 2 percent, with the inclusion of interaction effects. Regression model 3 supports the positive relationship between attitudes and buying intentions. The standardized beta coefficient is 0.78 (p-value <0.01) supporting the hypothesis H4.

LIMITATION

This study relied on self-reported measures and a vignette to simulate an electronic community for participants. The contrived environment simulated by the vignette may not accurately reflect consumer experience. Usually, when consumers review UGC, they have some intentions and purpose; therefore, the vignette may not fully capture all aspects of that experience. The study also focused on only one moderating factor, expertise. However, there are other individual characteristics and product features that can moderate the likelihood of elaboration. In spite of these shortcomings, the study provides some insights into why individual expertise moderates the impact of perceived content quality and perceived source credibility on attitudes in the context of UGC.

CONTRIBUTION

Although UGC is not controlled by organizations, they have the ability to monitor the content and to gain insights on the discourse. Some organizations provide the technology infrastructure and design features that facilitate the generation of user content. Users who participate in electronic communities and create and/or read content are either customers or potential customers and these forums are outlets for customer expression. For example, organizations can include technology design features that improve the structure and organization of UGC to facilitate the identification of quality content and other contextual cues to help users and consumers evaluate content.

Technology design features that facilitate the communication of contextual cues can enrich interaction in electronic communities. For example, OLCs can have design features that enable users to voluntarily provide more information about their identity and expertise on the subject matter and also enable other users to evaluate the expertise of their peers. Although UGC is unstructured, technology design features can provide functionality to organize and catalogue content for improved exploration. These features may enhance the ability of users to search and find relevant content and may increase the perception of content quality and reduce information overload.

Technology design features that facilitate the creation of content by users can also provide additional information or links to other sources of information to increase knowledge about the focal topic of discussion. These features can increase the expertise of users and members and improve ability to evaluate content quality to make informed decision. Reviewing information from UGC can provide organizations with insights on how consumers perceive their products and thus make marketing decision to positively influence consumer behavior and attitudes. The tone and mood of UGC are also important for organizations. Unfavorable content may indicate how consumers perceive product or services and may provide opportunities for generating new and innovative ideas for the market. For many organizations, understanding the external business environment is important for devising business strategies. UGC is an important gauge of consumer perception. Organizations can get a sense of user and consumer perceptions by scanning UGC in OLCs. Organization can devise strategies to take advantage of positive feedback and also diminish the effects of negative reviews. New product development teams can gain insights into customer reaction by exposing consumers to prototypes of products and evaluating UGC to ascertain consumer perception of the quality.

CONCLUSION

The study provides insights on how contextual cues and perceived content quality are moderated by consumer expertise. Although the study examines only one moderating variable, future research may explore other moderating variables, including absorptive capacity, to further understand the application of ELM in the context of UGC. For organizations that rely on UGC to gauge consumer perception, educating consumers on products and services will influence how consumers perceive and react to UGC. Some of the content generated by organizations can be designed to enhance the expertise of consumers to increase the likelihood of elaboration. Organizations can also devise strategies to influence the mood and tone of UGC by providing information to enlighten consumers and influence how the tone is perceived.

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